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Every budget is about making choices. Sometimes it's possible to fund items that are desirable in addition to those that are necessary. Sometimes it's not possible to fund even essential government services.

This coming spring, the great budget debate and challenge will be funding necessary government services. Tough choices will have to be made, and none of it is pretty. This county is facing its most difficult budget challenge since the early 1990s.

It is within that context that last December we introduced a resolution to alert a number of the nonprofit organizations that there will be no money for the discretionary one-time community grants the county has given in recent -- more financially flush -- years.

The facts are:

About 95 percent of nonprofit groups that provide services and programs to the county government do so under contract and would not be affected by this resolution.

The resolution applies only to one-time community grants, which have averaged about \$3 million a year, including grants awarded by the County Council outside the competitive review process conducted by the county government.

These grants have been in existence only since 1998 and were always meant to supplement a nonprofit organization's budget, not be its cornerstone.

Alerting the community organizations six months before budget action would provide early notice and an opportunity to explore other options for funds.

No one is saying that these grants are not for worthy purposes and valuable services and projects. But in the coming year, Montgomery County must assure our citizens that the essential services they depend on government to provide -- police, fire and rescue, education, libraries, and health and human services for our neediest residents -- will be funded first.

Why will the coming year's budget be so difficult? You have only to look at our current year's budget to see why. To balance this year's budget, the County Council increased the income tax to the legal maximum, tripled the energy tax, more than doubled the telephone tax, substantially increased many fees, reduced services, and delayed cost-of-living increases for government employees for more than four months.

Still, that wasn't enough. The council grudgingly granted County Executive Douglas M. Duncan's request to use \$18.5 million of funds intended for school construction to balance the budget, and reduced our reserve.

Then, the county needed to cut an additional \$33 million in services and programs to close a projected gap because of lower- than-projected income tax revenues.

And just last week, as part of the second midyear savings plan, the county executive proposed reducing the number of police officer candidates. He proposed laying off county workers. He proposed eliminating the county's Family Self-Sufficiency Program, which has helped move many women off welfare into living-wage jobs. He also proposed eliminating the Chore Services Program, which serves frail elderly people, and cutting

senior transportation services. He proposed another reduction in library hours. The total savings from those cuts is roughly equivalent to the funding provided for community grants.

The budget year that begins this July 1 will be worse. The county faces a budget gap of \$200 million, an estimate increased by the county executive Monday from a previous estimate of \$100 million. And whatever budget cuts Montgomery County receives from the state can be added to that total.

As you can see, we are having trouble funding the many necessary services that the county government provides to all our residents.

Joining us in our concern to ensure that essential county services and programs can continue to be provided are the teachers union, the county government employees' organization and the Montgomery County Taxpayers League. They agree the county's first obligation to its residents is to provide essential government services that no one else can fund. Those services are under the knife.

Alerting folks early that there will not be funds to go around for everything and that essential government services must come first in the coming budget year is what we have to do. There's no time like the present to start.

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